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ABSTRACT

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) is a new field, but it has a long history, since children have always learned from adults and demonstrated their competence by observation of their work or by the quality of their products or services. Later, formal learning became more valuable and recognized school credentials paved the way to good jobs. Only when adults began returning to school in large numbers has the idea of recognizing learning outside the campus evolved. In Canada, for lack of procedures recognizing adult learning, academic institutions admitted adults as "mature students" who could provide proof of what they had learned. Today, procedures are being developed to test and document adult learning from a variety of sources. Portfolios are encouraged, but it is often wrongly assumed that adults must develop a portfolio for each field of study instead of an integrated one. It is also thought that many new tests must be developed, whereas the standard tests that traditional undergraduates take may suffice to allow adults to demonstrate mastery of a subject. Developing a PLAR program requires creating new partnerships among business, schools, and organizations in order to design and implement knowledge demonstrations. (KC)

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Second National Forum on
Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition
The Canadian Labor Force Development Board

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RECOGNIZING OUR OWN POTENTIAL :
PLAR, Canadians and the Global Economy

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INTRODUCTION

Our conference will focus on Prior Learning Assessment, whose aim is to attain recognition for integrated learning and competence acquired outside the traditional academic setting by adults or young people alike

To better understand this new field, which plays a strong role in our economic development, we will briefly review the history behind PLAR, what is happening today, and what the future already holds in store for us

The past

At the beginning of time, parents and grand-parents transmitted various types of learning to their children. They counselled and corrected them, and with time this is how the family became the first learning setting.

A child would learn a trade, allowing him to earn a living later. Amongst his peers, he would be recognized as competent after having been observed at work or by the quality of his products or his services.

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Later, even before schools were established, philosophers and other masters acknowledged the learning potential of certain young people and acted as their mentors in helping them to acquire new and important knowledge.

Later still, School was created in order to expose a greater number of children to theoretical teaching on topics where the family and the community usually had few or no skills. With its specialized teachings and teachers, the Academia became the preferred place of learning when young graduates could aspire to enviable positions.

Formal school greatly contributed to the evolution of civilizations and when the University was created nine centuries ago, the economy flourished as never before in History. This is how Canada, spared from the great woes of war and famine afflicting so many other countries, and enjoying a willing, able and often educated work force and immigrant population, came to experience enviable growth and, thanks to qualified administrators and professors, has seen its school system evolve and contribute enormously in the progress of the country.

As school opened its doors to more and more young people, teaching them the basics and eventually more advanced forms of training, others were learning a trade outside their family circle, on which they could rely to earn a living. André Pratte (1997) from *La Presse* recently recalled : «Two hundred years ago, in Quebec, as well as in the United States and all over Europe, most young men and a great many young women were spending their teenage years away from their families, learning a new trade.» (free translation)

Time spent in formal schools varied according to the nature and level of the studies. However, the economist Gillian Hamilton states that the apprentice's contract, at the turn of the 18th century, lasted, on the average, five years and a half. Being an apprentice in the late 1700s often meant living with your master and his family with various obligations tied to this way of life, such as housework, for example. The asssessment or the recognition were given pending a period of probation. (Pratte, A., 1997)

With the passing of time, professional associations came into being, granting a licence to exercise a profession, once a degree was obtained and after succesfully completing exams, internships and other such processes. They were thereby looking out to protect the interests of the public.

Academic institutions became the preferred place of learning and what was learned outside school walls gradually lost value, as if the human brain shut down upon leaving school, opening up again a few hours for homework and closing up again, right away.

How many parents have momentarily felt «ignorant» when seeing what their children were learning! However, these same parents work inside and outside the home, doing volunteer work in their community, contributing in their own way to a healthy economy.

While the economy and formal education flourished, unions formed all over the world as advocates of workers' rights. Competency cards are issued guaranteeing the ability of an individual to perform a specific task; and as there were only a few changes in the skills required, the years of experience became a guarantee of competence.

With this booming economy, leisure interests multiplied. For instance, reading, music and arts in general gained popularity and offered learning opportunities. Travel became more accessible through improved transportation. It is said that travel shapes the mind of the young, well we can safely state that it actually shapes the mind of all people, regardless of age. Sports activities were also deemed healthy for the body and healthy for the mind and multiplied at an unexpected pace.

All these moments spent outside the formal school setting represented valuable learning opportunities, allowing the human mind to record data, classify it, make a selection and often apply it to concrete actions. It was also possible to learn when trying to find solutions to complex problems or when life brought unexpected joys.

It was only when adults returned to school that the idea of recognizing learning outside the campus evolved. A great many adults, upon reading the course outlines, realized that they had acquired this learning either in a work context, or during informal courses given by non traditional schools, or even through various activities.

In the United States, the Council for the Advancement of Experiential Learning (Columbia, Md) which became at a later date the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (Chicago, Ill.), was created in 1974 and became a fierce advocate of learning done outside the traditional school setting.

In Canada, for lack of procedures recognizing adult learning, academic institutions such as Concordia University in Montreal admitted adults as «mature students», who could provide proof of what they had learned, such as a certain number of core courses, before officially starting the selected program.

With time, academic institutions of all levels admitted adult students based on their age, and an experience deemed «equivalent», but in small numbers only. It quickly became obvious that the term «equivalency» meant very little and that age was no guarantee of either knowledge or competence.

It should be noted that whether in the academic milieu or in society at large, an adult who has learned differently from the established path of studies is considered «less knowledgeable» than the young person who has studied to the highest level of education possible, without interruption.

So, with the passing years, a sort of restrictions of learning settings other than the formal schooling occurred, thereby excluding those who did not attend the then recognized route,

formal school. The economy at this time was focused on local concerns, directed by leaders and other authorities.

Things were happening this way because society wanted it so.

The present

Today, society demands that School assign a value to what is learned outside its supervision, since the world itself has become a learning campus (Cross. P., 1981). The opportunities to learn and to acquire new skills are unlimited. Therefore, to progress, the economy must take this into account.

The phenomenon of Change is the main reason why the world has become a campus.

The change factor

The exceptional nature of change in the last few years has taken everyone by surprise, even though researchers such as Alvin Tofler predicted this would happen sooner as opposed to later.

At the beginning of the 60s, technology seemed to promise a life full of leisure time, with fewer working hours, instead, now, for many, there are no working hours left, less vacation time, if any at all...

Happiness, an added bonus, seems to have been left behind, judging by mounting drug abuse, prescriptions of all sorts and the many consultations with health specialists. The promised so-called easier life has become, for many of us, so much more complicated.

And what to say of our younger generation: how many parents worry what the future holds for them...

We are shocked that a diploma no longer guarantees a job in the related field of studies, especially when a selection committee declares «you do not have the right diploma»! It used to be a sure thing : a diploma ensured professional status and salary for the rest of your life. Many feel betrayed; our young generation gives up hope!

The official school systems is now facing drastic downsizing, and had had to let go competent professors, a dire consequence of lack of funds to maintain study programs.

Professional corporations and associations expect their members to enroll in continuous education, but are then faced with the difficult task of determining training needs; each member having taken a different road and having learned different things from that of their colleagues.

A parallel, informal school system offers a choice of courses often directly linked to gaining or maintaining employment and making an individual more functional in his environment. Unions themselves offer many informal courses to their members such as stress management in times of crisis, facilitating negotiations and the like. Community and Volunteer groups also provide informal training.

The work place struggles with many problems, among others, global competitiveness and a world economy governed by its own rules; it then offers training as needs become known.

Many things are learned, new skills are acquired. But when assessing this learning and these skills, an in-house approach is often used, for lack of a better method, and the outcomes are rarely transferable.

Moreover, a great number of adults and young people learn on their own what they feel motivated to learn and what they feel is expected of them, because change is at the helm.

But without an overall plan, without a common denominator, how is it possible to nourish hope?

Hope

Only recently did we come to realize that formal training alone does not equate the whole potential that an individual has to offer. For example :

- teenagers master some technologies brilliantly, while educated adults holding high level jobs have a hard time keeping up,
- adults in great number study history on their own,
- a woman, after raising her children, sits as president on many boards of directors and constantly dazzles and surprises its members;
- adults without formal university degrees read, converse and write sometimes better than graduates.

Thousands of young people and adults alike could contribute better to the revival of our economy, if only they had the opportunity to prove what they know, what they do best and who they really are.

Researchers have proven (Sansregret M., *Principles*, 1988) that it is possible to learn important things outside the realm of formal schools and that this new learning would deserve recognition, *as long as the outcomes of this learning are rigorously reviewed.*

For the adults and young generation who have learned a great deal outside School, news like this offers a glimmer of hope.

Doubt

In the wake of having prior learning recognition finally become official, the academic milieu as well as others, show some reserve. «How» to recognize acquired learning becomes a doubtful proposition.

This doubt is understandable, because numerous attempts at recognizing prior learning have failed miserably, often at great cost. Although professors are needed to teach disciplines and assess the results of what is learned, some people seem to think that recognizing learning from life experiences can be done with a wave of the wand!

One hears that a woman who has raised three children deserves a bachelor degree in psychology. Others believe that with the «right connections» things will be settled easily. Rumor has it that only standardized tests are valid to assess all sorts of learning and skills acquired through experience. In other cases, time is of the essence, so let's just give credits to those who can convince us. In short, Prior Learning Assessment is perceived by some as belonging to the mystic world, reinforcing the belief among scholars that it is impossible to recognize what has not been learned in a classroom.

Furthermore, those who work at recognizing prior learning often do not get adequate preparation, which is as important as teaching a given discipline. Many are drafted into this project, and more often than not, receive information instead of training. House policies are established where policies with a larger vision should be the main focus, since life experiences are not necessarily limited to what is being taught in one single institution, nor in a single job.

It is wrongly believed that a battery of new tests must be developed to recognize experiential learning when test and exams usually given to traditional students will more often than not suffice as candidates wishing to have their learning recognized must provide the same proof of their learning and skills as do regular students.

With regards to drawing up a portfolio as preparation for proof of learning (and not the assessment itself), it is wrongly assumed that as many portfolios are needed as there are fields of studies, rather than producing a single universal portfolio where each applicant writes what specific knowledge he has gained, and seeks to have the outcomes of his learning assessed, in line with PLA objectives.

At a time where change is a dominant factor, where economic uncertainty reigns and where rules are global, the portfolio allows a candidate to identify the diversity of his knowledge and skills in order to seek out only those courses which are lacking in his education. This must all be done with a transferable skills approach rather than limiting the process to one institution or one job.

More and more leaders in the school system, in professional corporations, in the work force and in unions are expressing a desire for prior learning assessment to be achieved in such a way. They understand that the future, which is already upon us, demands this of us.

The future is now

As the future is already here, now might be a good time to review our way of thinking, arm ourselves with universal policies and processes, and develop new partnerships.

Examine our mindset

Every human being has the undeniable birth right to eat, have a roof over one's head, be warm, in a nutshell, a right to satisfy one's basic needs before aspiring to achieve personal development. (Maslow, A. H., 1970)

Whereas,

- change is a threat to meeting basic needs,
- to meet these basic needs, it is imperative to learn and to work,
- the possibilities for learning are unlimited because the human mind does not close up upon leaving school, work does not necessarily cease when closing the office door, one stops being a parent because one's children are young adults and one can deny that learning continues at all times and in all places in one's life,
- the opportunities for work are more restricted,
- duplication of learning and abilities is a waste of time and money and creates major obstacles to our economy has keeping up with the new global order,
- competence is not related to social or economic status, nor to race, color or religion, but rather to the notion of knowing, of doing and of being in relation to objectives,
- continuing education is almost a must to remain competitive and proof of that learning is expected to be demonstrated almost continuously,
- individuals learn on their own a large quantity of valid things,
- community and volunteer organizations provide training made-to-measure,
- unions provide training made-to-measure,
- employers provide training made-to-measure,

- informal schools act as a complementary system,

- professional corporations and associations test the outcomes of formal training before awarding a license to practice and they also provide continuous training,

- academic institutions, because of their structure, mandate and downzising cannot open new programs and courses to meet the new economic needs,

- formal academic institutions give not only basic education, but have expertise in assessment and accreditation,

the first point being to open up our minds to today's reality, the second to develop basic universal policies and processes in prior learning assessment.

Develop basic and universal policies and processes

As mentioned previously, human beings have the right to have their basic needs met. These rights are becoming more and more threatened.

Whereas,

- some abilities and skills acquired from life experiences are not clearly identified,

- before assessing most of the abilities and skills, it is necessary to identify this learning and summarize it,

- the expertise regarding assessment belongs to the formal academia,

- Prior Learning Assessment is a program or a system that is easy to integrate into the administrative structure of the existing school system, associations and professional groups, businesses, unions and other partners previously mentioned,

- identification of experiential learning must be done by properly trained professionals,

- assessment of experiential learning must be done by professors and experts in the field of the learning to be assessed, just as they are mandated to assess learning in a classroom or during apprenticeships,

- in view of equity and justice, ethics and morals, the quality of the assessment and accreditation must be of the same caliber as that used to assess what has been learned in a formal classroom,

– abilities and skills from experiential learning are not always related to what is taught in a classroom, nor to what is performed in a specific job,

it becomes imperative that academic institutions extend their traditional mandate and develop policies and processes as strict as those used for formal learning, that others concerned can benefit from it, based on a standard and unique frame of reference.

In 1980, Henry Spille from the American Council on Education gave a definition of prior learning assessment which is worth every word : it is the identification, assessment and accreditation of experiential learning. Since most academic institutions and their partners are not yet involved in recognizing prior learning, according to Spille's definition, it is recommended that a prior step be added : the planning.

Consequently, implementation of policies and processes in prior learning assessment should be done in four steps.

Implementation of a PLA program

- Plan the steps of the program in academic institutions and professional corporations, in the work force and within union groups, using a unique base of reference.
- Identify learning and competencies acquired in various settings, using if possible a universal portfolio.
- Assess this learning and these competencies with assessment methods selected according to the nature of what is to be assessed.
- Give accreditation to this learning and these competencies, where appropriate, using report cards, diplomas, licenses, competency cards, etc., thereby allowing them to be transfered.

The third point in working effectively to recognize prior learning is based on establishing partnerships.

Create new partnerships

Recognizing prior learning means allowing each Canadian to live and behave in a manner which is as near to his personal aspirations and his own potential as possible, so that he can best adapt to the changes over which he has, more often than not, little control.

Whereas,

– the world has become a learning campus (Cross, P. 1981),

- our economy depends now and will depend even more on rules from afar,
- adults and the younger generation will continue to learn and develop new skills,
- community and volunteer organizations will continue to offer made-to-measure training,
- unions will continue to train workers and stand up for them,
- the work force will continue to introduce and search for new competencies,
- the serious informal schools will continue to offer a complement to education,
- professional corporations and associations must continue to ensure the public's safety by providing updtated training,
- the formal school system is still the privileged place to have learning and competencies assessed and accredited,

a form of partnership between all these groups is probably essential within the global economic vision, all the while protecting the autonomy of each involved party.

In a global economy, people with specific skills are needed, people who know how to apply these skills and demonstrate a proper behavior in a given situation. These skills, know-how and behavior must be transferable among academic institutions, from one work place to another, from one province to the next, from one country to another.

A form of partnership

- Partnership between Canadians could be for example, to acquire knowledge, know-how, in relation to life and work objectives, within the limits of one's own abilities, accepting that others with a different potential can become partners rather than competitors.
- Partnership between volunteer and community organizations could be to offer courses made to measure within a frame of reference identical to that of formal school, thus avoiding marginalization of its members.
- Partnership between union groups could be to offer complementary training, protect the rights and interests of their members based on their potential rather than the number of years of experience, the cumulative years could nonetheless be factored into holidays, retirement, other benefits and priority for job assignment.

- Partnership between work force groups could be to work in each their own field of competence, based on a cross Canadian economy which is positioned in a world economy.

- Partnership between informal schools could be to offer complementary courses and programs based on the same reference frame, avoiding useless duplication with what is already taught in formal schools.

- Partnership between professional corporations or associations could deal with defending public interests, based on the same reference frames and avoiding duplication of services, to have prior learning identified from a lower to an upper level.

- Partnership between formal academic institutions could deal with: developing policies and processes based on a universal reference frame, avoiding duplication of programs and courses, standardizing curriculum presentation and transcripts.

A vision of partnership could bring all the partners together in an effort to establish cooperatively a social contract. The offer for this kind of partnership could be extended either by academic institutions or by professional corporations, in consultation with the rare specialists in the field of prior learning assessment.

CONCLUSION

Given the new economic world order, Canadians will undoubtedly continue to learn from various sources, on an almost continuing basis, will have to pass easily from one study program to another, from one school to the next. They may also be required to transfer their skills from job to job, from one profession to the next, or move to another province or even another country.

Since places, methods and even contents of learning are so very diversified, it is impossible for an employer to guess what has so far been learned. It is equally difficult for the learners to give valid and reliable proof of their learning. Therefore, identification, assessment and accreditation of what has been learned outside formal school could be made by the institutions themselves, together with other training partners.

In order to restore an almost non existent equilibrium, it is necessary to *examine our mindset* and whether the basic needs of individuals, as well as his need to grow and ultimately contibute to the economy, are met. This implies a recognition of the level of competence and integrity in a specific field, regardless of social and economic status, race, language or religion.

The task in prior learning assessment is to develop *universal and basic policies and processes*, so that the program can be implemented with justice and equity, ethics and morals, in a responsible manner (Sansregret, M., *Principles*, 1988). Therefore, the prior learning program must be implemented and maintained by only those recognized specialists in the field of prior learning and those requesting recognition must provide the irrefutable proof of their learning.

This new practice incites all concerned parties to *establish partnerships*, since the world has become a learning campus (Cross, P., 1981). Also, since the economy must follow global rules, training providers may have to meet with the formal school system, to write a sort of social contract revolving around learning and acquiring new competencies and to establish their value and transferability.

In this perspective, we could be entering the **future now**.

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